

BOOK REVIEW

Pr. Dr. Radu Sever Ungureanu, *Considerații spirituale în terapia cancerului* [Spiritual considerations in cancer pathology], Editura Theosis, Oradea, 2021, ISBN 978-606-94344-6-8, 390p.

Pr. Bogdan Chiorean, *Îngrijirile paliative: de la teorie la empatie* [Palliative care: from theory to empathy], Editura Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2022, ISBN 978-606-607-383-7, 258p.

Octavian Blaga, *Iubirea* [Love], n.p., Sherbrooke, 2021, ISBN 978-606-95358-0-6, 316p.

In the last section of this volume, we would like to point out to our readers some publications of interest on the topic of spirituality in palliative care (PC). All three volumes are written by priests with significant experience in the field of PC, and with multidisciplinary background qualifications.

The book by Father Radu Sever Ungureanu, a graduate in theology and in social work, represents the published version of his doctoral thesis in theology, entitled "The mission of the priest of charitable ministry in the context of oncological illness", a thesis defended in 2017 at the A.I. Cuza University of Iași, Romania. The author is a priest with more than two decades of activity as chaplain at St. John's Emergency Hospital and at the Regional Institute of Oncology, both in Iași. The work comprises ten chapters, in addition to the usual introductory and concluding pieces. The first chapter, the most extensive, undertakes a thorough analysis of the role of the priest working in the clinical setting (missionary priest or priest of charity, in established church language, or chaplain priest, more common in the scientific literature). Drawing on his wealth of experience, including in the field of PC, present in the medical unit where he works, the author examines the particularities of this role in the context of an oncology clinic (in comparison with the work of a parish priest and that of a chaplain in an emergency unit), in the mutual and varied interaction with all the categories of people with whom he constantly meets: oncology patients, medical staff, carers, but also with himself, both in the space of the wards and in the chapel of the medical unit. This chapter combines an observational, autoethnographic study (the author makes constant references to his own experience, sometimes in the third person) with a study of the literature, creating a professional (auto)portrait, with the intention of offering it as a general guide for his professional colleagues. The following chapters draw only on numerous and varied references (medical, theological, literary), and examines several issues relevant to the general theme of the volume as aetiopathological and epidemiological data, psychosomatic aspects (fear, stages of suffering, the correlation between faith and health, illness, recovery, the value of fasting and weeping as religious practices and as therapeutic means), and psychosocial aspects (death and mourning in an oncological context). A final chapter is devoted to PC, with a series of theoretical, especially theological, considerations and brief presentations of PC in Romania, Italy, Belgium, and France (current at the time of writing, 2017). The work provides a very useful insight into the perspective that the chaplain priest of the Christian Orthodox tradition has on the relationship between medicine and faith, in the oncological context, and on his own mission in the clinical space, an insight relevant also for

readers interested in PC, in particular. As an interesting remark, the author considers that his activity "integrates" into the field of nursing (pp. 44-45). Although "clinical pastoral counselling" is not formally enlisted in nursing and allied health professions, their shared concern for a comprehensive understanding and approach to their beneficiaries makes them "natural allies", as someone put it, and offers opportunities for collaboration that can still be amply exploited, as this book aptly demonstrates.

Father Bogdan Chiorean is a priest and director of the "Saint Hierarch Nectarios" Palliative Care Centre in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. A graduate in theology and in dental medicine, he obtained his PhD in theology in 2019 at the Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca with the thesis "Elements of bioethics and Orthodox spirituality in palliative care. Case study: the "Sfântul Nectarie" Cluj palliative care center", a thesis that lies at the origin of the present volume. The work provides an overview of PC from a Christian-Orthodox perspective, an examination that has been largely lacking, as Orthodox theological and bioethical literature has so far touched rather sporadically and superficially on this increasingly important field of contemporary medicine (with the notable exception of the American physician and professor Daniel B. Hinshaw). The author does not confine himself to spiritual issues, but also addresses medical, psychological, social, and ethical issues of PC. The volume begins with an overview of PC and the "hospice philosophy", then identifies the basis of the specific perspective of Orthodox theology and religious practice (the value of the body, the spiritual causes and meanings of illness, the pastoring of the sick in the context of PC) and continues with an overview of the major medical issues and challenges that arise in PC (nutrition and hydration, necessary and contingent treatments, alternative and complementary medical means, pain therapy, prognosis of death, decisions on further treatment or resuscitation), from the perspective of their significant moral and spiritual implications (equity in accessing services, communication of diagnosis, the problem of double effect, therapeutic (non)relentlessness, care of the bereaved family, caregiver burnout). In addition to a medical and theological literature of the highest quality, the author constantly refers to his experience in the PC center he leads. In the current, revised version, the book no longer includes an extensive qualitative and quantitative survey based on questionnaires, addressed to patients, family members, and care staff of the center, with questions on the mentioned issues. We can only hope for the publication, in one form or another, of this important study. Instead, the volume presented here contains, in its last part, fifty "empathy exercises", as the author calls them, to give the reader "a more

complex picture of what patients have taught us" (p. 209). These are brief personal meditations - probably from a diary - on the interaction between the PC professional and hospice beneficiaries or their families. They are wonderful lessons in wisdom, for, in the words quoted by the author, "people who die teach us how to live" (p. 218). And among the teachings for priests: "When I accepted to serve in a hospice, my greatest fear was that I would not know what to say to them. It took me several years to realize that they had to tell me." (p. 212). Now, this important contribution to the theology, morality, and spirituality literature on PC is out of print in bookstores, so a new edition would be particularly welcome.

The third book reported here belongs to a Romanian Orthodox priest, Octavian Blaga, who works as a spiritual care specialist in several homes for the elderly and hospitals in Canada. With a degree in physics and one in theology, the author has travelled an impressive path from childhood traumas to being a carer for those on the brink of departure. The book presents a succession of episodes from a journey spanning three decades, mixed with theological and spiritual reflections related to or provoked by them. No chronological or ideological order is evident - so that it can be read anyway, either legato or here and there - mixing memories of adolescence and youth, in full search of a higher meaning of life, and of his experience as a counsellor priest in charge of social assistance in a diocese in western Romania, with accounts of meetings with patients or professionals in the centers served, including PC centers. The author does not write with any research or academic intentions, but only as a testimony of his experience about the only subject of the book, love, which he considers an infinite and indefinable reality, synonymous, in fact, with the name of Divinity. Because of its character, at once elusive and overwhelming, it is a subject that can hardly be grasped and understood other than through direct personal experience or, at least, through the testimony of such experience. This is precisely what gives this book a particular relevance also for PC, where, however well organized the whole medical-psycho-socio-spiritual care apparatus may be, the uniqueness of the encounter with one's own finitude and that of others overflows any formalization, operationalization, efficiency, and objectification... Perhaps no other experience is more conducive to testing the existence of what we call love than the perception of our own death and that of our fellow human beings. All the characters in Father Octavian Blaga's accounts express the same thing: at the end of life, only one thing remains viable, and this involves the appropriate activation of a need/power that, in the daily rush of our life, we do not even suspect, and that the encounter, touch, and listening to a fellow human being threatened by death or seized by it reveals to us with a striking clarity (*passim*). This is spirituality in healthcare in its most authentic form.

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